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E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/16/2017

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SUBJECT: VATICAN: MARTINO SEES END NEAR FOR CASTRO; AMBASSADOR URGES  
PRUDENCE DURING TRANSITION

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter G. Martin, A/DCM, AMEMB VATICAN, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Holy See Justice and Peace Council President Cardinal Martino told the Ambassador January 16 that he had heard from contacts the same morning that Fidel Castro had peritonitis and was edging even closer to death. The Ambassador emphasized to Martino and to Holy See FM Mamberti the need for the Church to play a strong role in the transition to a more representative government. He emphasized to both officials that the USG sought a transition to democracy in Cuba and not a simple succession or the anointment of Raul; he urged the Holy See to resist the rush to anoint this leadership - in this way giving institutions friendly to democracy within the country - including the local Church - a chance to be heard and help nurture democratic institutions. Both Vatican officials were sympathetic to USG views on the transition. Martino said that the papal nunciature in Havana would surely remain open and functioning in the event of a transition, but implied that the Holy See would be prudent in making quick judgments about any new regime. End summary.

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Martino: End is Near for Castro  
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¶2. (C) Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, told the Ambassador January 16 that he had heard from contacts the same morning that Cuban President Fidel Castro had peritonitis. Martino, who has been criticized for being too close to the Cuban regime, said he thought Castro would not last much longer. He advised the U.S. and others to position themselves sooner rather than later to for a transition. "If you relaxed your embargo now," he said, "you would be in a much better position when the inevitable change occurs." Martino said that he could see the Communist Party taking over with Raul Castro simply serving as a puppet. You never know, he said, "that could be even worse than Fidel."

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Ambassador: Resist Rush to Anoint Raul  
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¶3. (C) The Ambassador emphasized to Martino, and to Holy See Secretary for Relations with States (FM equivalent) Dominique

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Mamberti in a January 12 meeting, the need for the Church to play a strong role in the transition to a more representative

government, noting that when the time came, Church leaders would have to make themselves heard. He also noted the role of humanitarian aid through the Catholic Church's Caritas network; a good influx of funds could be very helpful to the Cuban Church during a transition.

¶4. (C) Turning specifically to the moment of truth when Fidel dies, the Ambassador emphasized to both officials that the USG sought a transition to democracy in Cuba and not a simple succession or the anointment of Raul. When Castro dies there will be a rush - especially by Venezuela and perhaps Iran - to recognize Raul and/or his junta, he explained. The USG hopes that the Holy See will be patient and resist the rush to anoint this leadership - in this way giving institutions friendly to democracy within the country - including the local Church - a chance to be heard and help nurture democratic institutions. The Holy See, U.S., and other countries with an interest in a free, democratic Cuba, could then play an important role in allowing some space for freedom of speech, assembly and religion. This could pave the way for a legitimate electoral process.

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Comment  
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¶5. (C) While he made no promises, Mamberti was engaged in the conversation and sympathetic to USG views. Martino, despite his well-known opposition to the embargo, also seemed well disposed to U.S. thinking on the transition. He said that the papal nunciature would surely remain open and engaged in the event of a transition, but implied that the Holy See would be prudent in making quick judgments about any new regime. Post welcomes insight and/or points from the Department as the situation develops and we continue our engagement here.

ROONEY